



Mayor Franklin Visits Africa with CARE

Fight empowers African Women

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As the first female mayor of Atlanta and someone who understands that empowered women can be powerful women, I was excited to join CARE staffers on a recent visit to South Africa to observe some of their programs and to spread the CARE "I Am Powerful" message to women and girls around the globe.

CARE is one of the world's largest private humanitarian organizations and is headquartered here in Atlanta. The organization understands from 60 years of experience that improving women's lives is a critical first step in changing lives in some of the poorest countries in the world. CARE's I Am Powerful campaign focuses on connecting women in the United States with women in impoverished countries.

It is believed that the saying "women and children first" comes from South Africa. The practice of "women and children first" originated off the coast of Hermanus when a British ship, the Birkenhead, sank in 1852. Of the approximately 600 people on board, all 200 women and children survived.

Today, the sinking ship that threatens the survival of Africa's women and children is HIV/AIDS. While everyone in Africa is in need of education about prevention, the voices I heard most often were of women and children. Lesotho, a country completely surrounded by South Africa, was one of our first stops. Lesotho has one of the highest HIV infection rates in the world, with more than 25 percent of the population infected with the virus. The life expectancy for women in Lesotho is 35 years.

Young women around the world are 1.6 times more likely to be living with HIV/AIDS than young men. They account for 76 percent of African youth living with HIV/AIDS.

In 2003, there were an estimated 15 million AIDS orphans around the world, and that number is expected to increase to 25 million by 2010.

While I had traveled to Africa several times before, for business and pleasure, this trip was special because of the women, children, young people, caregivers, grandmothers, peer educators, employers and so many others I met who are committed to the fight against HIV/AIDS. There were many and varied voices.

The voices of the young people at Likuena High School were clear, where 84 of the 791 students are double orphans, because both parents have died of AIDS. They have witnessed the devastation of the disease and they want the world's help in eliminating it.

Young women openly shared with me that safe sex is not always an option for them. In a country where women have minimal legal rights, being powerful is a real choice and not just rhetoric.



A child, but no childhood

One of the courageous young women I met was Relebohile Damane (pronounced Ray-lay-bow-hee-lay), a soft-spoken 17-year old who is the primary caretaker for her 14-year-old brother.

She spent her adolescence taking care of her mother, who died of AIDS in 2000, and the next five years taking care of her father, who died last year. With the innocence of a child who has missed her childhood, she admitted that she was not ready to be in charge but that she had to do it.

As she wiped her tears with her shirt, she remembered those painful times and the daily struggle to find enough food for herself and her brother. "We didn't have much money to buy food. We used to fetch wild vegetables," she said. CARE recognized that a lot of children in the village were like Relebohile. They were not going to school because they were hungry, and if they went they fell asleep or had trouble concentrating. CARE's Secure the Child Project established gardening programs at schools hardest hit by the food crisis and HIV/AIDS.

The students at Likuena High School now have a garden where they grow vegetables and fruit, so that one meal a day includes fresh vegetables. Relebohile also has a garden at home, with carrots, beets and even peach trees. Her experience as a caretaker for her parents is the impetus for her desire to become a physician. A few months ago, she was admitted to Lesotho's national university, where she will begin her studies.

There are retired grandmothers, doctors and women in villages who are caring for the children orphaned by HIV/AIDS. Women who have probably earned the right to rest are spending their days educating an entire community and a country about prevention.

Flory Maliteboho Kolobe created a counseling center five years ago, and she says that she personally decided to do something about HIV/AIDS because she was "bound" to educate people about the disease.



Pervasive discrimination

Dr. Ntsiuoa Rathabaneng, a physician, is only the second Anglican priest in Lesotho, and she came out of retirement to fight against the discrimination that is still so pervasive in Africa. "Stigma is a spiritual issue," Rathabaneng said. "How can we retire when there is so much prejudice and need?"

By some estimates, 900 people a day die in Africa from HIV/AIDS. Individuals with HIV/AIDS who work in one of the factories I visited can miss more than three days of work just waiting to get medication, because of the long lines and limited health care options.

I still hear the voices of sisters and daughters from Johannesburg to the mountains of Thoteng, and my promise to them was that I would help to tell their stories. As we celebrate Mother's Day next month, please keep the world's most vulnerable women in your thoughts.

Of the 876 million illiterate adults in the developing world, two-thirds are women.

Each year, more than 500,000 women --- at least one every minute --- dies from pregnancy-related causes.

Every extra year of primary education for girls results in a 10 percent to 20 percent increase in a woman's wages later in life and reduces the risk that her children will die in infancy.

Please visit www.care.org for more information on the I Am Powerful campaign and how you can help make a difference in the lives of others.